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Are we Delivering the Best Practice Curriculum for a Degree in Visual Merchandising?

Introduction

This paper will review the curriculum for the three year full time degree in Visual Merchandising and Display at an Institute of Technology in Dublin. This course was previously taught as a two year Display Design Certificate; the academic year of 2009-2010 was the first time students graduated with a degree qualification. This degree is the first of its type in Ireland and has the potential to be an industry leader. The BA in Visual Merchandising and Display is the result of an extensive process of consultation with key figures in the retail industry, and is preparing students for a role as a visual merchandiser in a retail environment. According to the college website;

The BA in Visual Merchandising and Display will prepare graduates for a career as Visual Merchandisers and Retail Display Designers in the Irish and international retail industries. Merchandising is a key element in any successful retail industry and this new programme will have a vital role to play in making sure that there is steady supply of suitably qualified graduates who can help Irish retail companies develop this aspect of their business (Dublin Institute of Technology, 2010).

It is hoped the graduates of this programme will be competent in the theories and strategies of visual merchandising, have skills relevant to retail display, and will operate at a high level in the retail industry.

Currently the course is heavily weighted in the area of creating three dimensional props, which gives the students an opportunity to develop strong practical and craft based skills, the students physically produce the display. Alongside these skills I argue that conceptual design, using computer rendered three dimensional images producing workable designs to scale should also be part of the programme. The college has an excellent facility in providing students with human scale 'windows' to work in, however the dimensions of these, and the restriction of physically constructing the props hinder some aspects of the students creativity. I argue in conjunction with the practical areas of the course, emphasis

should also be placed on developing computer aided design skills, which would encourage students to embrace the advances in technology that may help them create forward looking displays. This paper will discuss the course objectives, what is meant by 'curriculum' and address is whether additions to the current Visual Merchandising curriculum would enhance it. As this is a new programme there is bound to be a 'settling in' period, however an investigation of not only how Visual Merchandisers currently operate, but what skill needs may arise in the future should be considered.

Course Content and Objectives

What should be taught on a Visual Merchandising course? There is very little literature on Visual Merchandising, and text books are limited. To write the course document, indigenous retail industry was consulted, and the information gathered, alongside Bell and Ternus's (2003), 'Silent Selling', a training text book used in the United States, were used as guides. Bell and Ternus's second edition of their book 'Silent Selling; Best Practices and Effective Strategies in Visual Merchandising' (2003) is divided into six parts, which are; Preparation for Visual Creativity; Practices and Strategies for the Selling Floor; Communicating Retail Atmospherics; Visual Practices for Non-traditional Venues; Tools and Techniques for Merchandise Display; and Career Strategies. These headings are further subdivided into chapters. Another seminal text is Diamond and Diamond's 'Contemporary Visual Merchandising and Environmental Design', originally published in 1999, they cover chapters on subjects such as Planning and Developing Visual Presentations; Facilities Design: Exteriors, Interiors, and Fixturing; Mannequins and Other Human Forms; Materials, Props, and Tools of the Trade; Principles of Design; Colour: Fundamental Concepts and Applications; Lighting: Dramatising the Selling Floor and Display Areas; Themes and Settings for Windows and Interiors; Signage and Graphics in the Retail Environment and Execution of a Visual Presentation: Creating the Overall Concept.

A visual merchandising degree course should introduce the students to design and display in retail and exhibition spaces. Topics should include an analysis of display as a visual

merchandising medium and an examination of the principles and applications of display and design. Upon completion, students should be able to plan, build, and evaluate designs and displays. Visual Merchandisers are responsible for conceptualising, designing, and implementing window and in-store displays for retail, exhibitions and events. Students should be encouraged to combine their creativity and artistic flair with technical know-how to set up displays that maximize the space of the store while effectively catching the eye and appealing to the senses of their target customers.

Their main goals are:

- (1) Create and maintain an image for a department or store that resonates with their target customers,*
- (2) Increase customer traffic in the store, and*
- (3) Guide their customers' browsing through merchandise placement and store layout to result in an eventual sale* (Bell, Ternus 2003 pp.18-19).

Although, both texts by Bell and Ternus, and Diamond and Diamond are valid they were compiled in 2003 and 1999 respectively. The latest text book, and written from a UK perspective is by Tony Morgan, the tutor of Visual Merchandising at the Fashion Retail Academy in London, and author of 'Visual Merchandising: Window and In-Store Displays for Retail' (2009). According to Morgan, Visual Merchandisers may provide input or oversee the design and layout of a store or department, fashion showrooms, tradeshow displays, and any other areas where the store's apparel and accessories are displayed, promoted, or sold. In addition to drawing on their knowledge of customer tendencies when designing their displays, Visual Display Artists take into account current fashions and trends, promotions, and seasonal factors. In larger department stores or retail chains, Visual Merchandisers coordinate with the head office and other design teams (including buyers and sales staff) to ensure consistency with the corporate brand or image (Morgan, 2009).

The skills mentioned (Bell, Ternus 2003, Diamond, Diamond 1999, Morgan 2009) make a good basis for the content of a Visual Merchandising degree course, and the best practice visual merchandising curriculum must take these entire subject headings into account, as becoming proficient in these areas can form the basis for writing of the

learning outcomes for the course. However I argue due to advances in technology that there are also other valid subjects such as three dimensional modelling that Visual Merchandising students should be addressing.

Curriculum and Learning Outcomes

The training needs of the students are paramount in designing a curriculum, and it is important to identify what needs to be understood by the student before implementing modules, Minton (1991) believed as teachers we must ask ourselves questions such as; what are students setting out to learn? What are you going to get them to do in order to learn that? What preparation do you need to do, and by what time? How will they know what they have to learn and whether they have succeeded or not? How will you know whether they have learned what you intended? How will you consolidate the learning? Ask after: Did it go as intended? What actually happened? Why? Tawil and Harvey (2004) argued curriculum should be taken to mean '*the organization of sequences of learning experiences in view of producing desired learning outcomes*'. Learning outcomes are an essential part of the Bologna paradigm change which has been driven by the need to respond to globalisation. They are at the heart of an educational revolution that has been slow to gestate but is beginning to have a profound impact (Adam, 2008).

Learning outcomes are an integral part of curriculum design;

'...learning outcomes cannot be divorced from teaching, learning and assessment. This is the most significant set of relationships for curriculum designers. Once the learning outcomes have been decided it is obviously good practice to decide suitable methods of assessing them and the production of relevant assessment criteria. The final stage of the process is to design the appropriate delivery mechanism – the teaching and learning methods to be used. This sequence for module / course development is not necessarily as rigid as described. The important point is that outcomes-learning-delivery-assessment enjoys a causal link and clear reflection on their relationship improves the coherence of course design'. (Adam, 2004, p.6)

Donnelly and Fitzmaurice (2005) suggested there are a variety of models for the design of courses in higher education (Toohey 1999; Biggs1999) and they also believed that many of the same issues are relevant in the context of designing modules. *In the process of devising a module, the key is to forge educationally sound and logical links between*

learner needs, aims, learning outcomes, resources, learning and teaching strategies, assessment criteria and evaluation (Donnelly, Fitzmaurice, 2005 p.100). When designing modules, they argued it is important for teachers to be aware of concepts of deep and surface approaches to learning. Pring (2001) suggested to teach is to engage intentionally in those activities which bring about learning and (Noddings, 1995) described teaching as a relation, one to which both teacher and student contribute (as cited in Fitzmaurice, 2010).

Visual Merchandising Curriculum; the way forward

A discussion among visual merchandisers and visual merchandising lecturers took place over the internet on the Visual Merchandisers Creative Forum on LinkedIn, during December 2009 - January 2010, the debate was titled 'Critical Issues in Visual Merchandising Today' and was started by an educator who was looking for subjects to teach on a visual merchandising course. LinkedIn is a professional social network with 60 million members (Rao, 2010). Among others Brian Preussker of Bpreussker Creative Retail Services suggested that;

'It should be very helpful for students to understand what an important part visual merchandising plays in the market place today. The opportunities for a visual merchandiser are many. Not just in retail and wholesale but e-commerce, the entertainment industry, marketing etc. That's what I love about this profession there are no limitations on what you can do or be involved in.'

Preussker goes on to say;

'understanding how to communicate your ideas is very important. Teaching your students how to use Illustrator will be very useful and they will love you for it.'

Alan Ingram the director of Displaybank argued;

'One of the most fundamental areas that students may need to look at is, 'Merchandise Handling' If it does not look right it won't sell! Windows need 'Symmetrical or Asymmetrical balance, without this basic knowledge windows will be 'boring'. Lines of sight need to be encompassed in all group presentations. 'Focal points' need to be established whilst creating the picture. All basic stuff which should be taught to all students as well as some already out there!'

Jeanne Holbrook, a store planning designer stated;

Illustrator or AutoCAD are important if you are working in corporate offices sending out directives and planograms, or if you are developing ideas for store design and fixtures. I believe SketchUp is important too. Being aware of color trends, design trends in fashion and architecture are important.

All of the participants quoted are based in the United States. This interesting debate brought up a lot of issues; however I was particularly interested in the aspect of using technology. I argue by introducing technology such as SketchUp into the curriculum the students can use it as a tool to help aid the presentation of their design concepts. Google SketchUp is a 3D modeling program primarily designed for architects, interior designers, filmmakers, game developers, and related professions. It is designed to be easier to use than other 3D CAD programs. On April 27, 2006, Google announced Google SketchUp, a freely-downloadable version of SketchUp. Files such as JPGs, TIFFs, PNGs and PDFs can be imported (SketchUp, 2006). The following is an example of a student's work from another college who was encouraged to use SketchUp; the student's permission was sought and granted to use as an example for the purpose of this paper. The student's description of her design was as follows;

The project is to promote the new iPhone3G that is due to be available from the 25th March 2010. I know many people that have been waiting for this for long time and the "wantability" and curiosity would play a big role in this window display. The window would be mostly red with the phrase "You've been waiting for this" written in white and small "holes" where potential customers would look into the window to see the product. Inside the window display everything is black and the suspended displays (shaped with the Vodafone logo) have the iPhone inside. These displays are surrounded by laser beams to give the effect of something very precious and unique.

you've been waiting for this



you've been waiting for this



Isabel Barros

The work was presented as an idea or concept to solve the problem of how best to engage the passerby in the launch of a new phone product. The student used technology to create the window display, and also used the technology of SketchUp to convey their idea. A realistic application of having to produce the design of this window in the display studio would have been impossible. However by using technology to deliver the design concept, it becomes easy to read and understand.

As educators we must be aware that students learn and study in different ways, learning styles (Claxton & Murrell, 1987; Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004a, 2004b) and learning style models (Gregorc & Ward, 1977; Gregorc, 1979, 1985; Kolb, 1984; Felder & Silverman, 1988; Dunn & Dunn, 1975; Dunn, Dunn, & Price, 1982, 1989; Entwistle & Tait, 1995; Fleming, 2001; Duff, 2004;) have offered various descriptions that range from relatively fixed student natural dispositions to modifiable preferences for learning and studying (as cited in Hawk, Shah, 2007). Harden and Crosby (2000:335, as cited by O'Neill, McMahon) described teacher-centred learning strategies as the focus on the teacher transmitting knowledge, from the expert to the novice. In contrast, they describe student-centred learning as focusing on the students' learning and 'what students do to achieve this, rather than what the teacher does'. Therefore, if a student finds that using technology best conveys their design idea, even if the educator is not familiar with the programme, this approach should be encouraged. This definition emphasises the concept of the student 'doing'.

Currently the students at The Institute of Technology are given lessons in Computer Aided Drawing (CAD) however it has emerged that the majority of them find it a difficult programme. CAD skills are important for Visual Merchandising students, as part of their remit in employment they will be drawing plans and elevations, however I argue SketchUp skills are equally as valuable for them to create valid realistic three dimensional images of their conceptual designs. In the third and final year of the course students complete a retail design module, this involves primary research of organic forms which with conceptual development sketches become 3D structural forms. There is informal instruction on the use of SketchUp from the module tutor, prior to this there has been no use of the computer programme. I argue the use of SketchUp could help students

effectively communicate their designs from the start of the three year programme and Modules, using SketchUp as the modeling tool need to be introduced in first year. Due to trends and the sharing of information globally, a paradigm shift of how we teach the Visual Merchandising students is due and alongside the practical modules covered, there should also be the add on benefit of conceptual three dimensional modeling; I believe that this aspect of the course would open up interest from the corporate world in the caliber of the students. This transformation in thinking is driven by advances in technology. I propose that there is the introduction of two new modules, one in first year and the other in second year. The first year module would take the format of designing a window using a current event as the basis for writing the brief. This would comprise the module. During second year the module would consider the design of an exhibition space. The use of technology in these two modules would then assist the third year retail design module as the students would have previously used the software programme. Students will need formal training on using SketchUp and it is proposed that at least five hours tuition be given by a competent user.

Further research could identify what technological needs Visual Merchandising post graduate students encounter in the work place. This could take the format of a survey or questionnaire. The college has strong links with the retail industry, they should be consulted to discover what technology is being used and provided in the workplace. Retail Excellence Ireland is one such contact to engage with, it defines itself as the Irish retail industries watchdog and was established in 1995 to promote best practice standards in the Irish Retail Industry, according to their website they have over; *590 leading retail companies as members, operating over 8,000 stores in the Irish market. They believe; our members are the most progressive and innovative retail operators.* In the rapidly changing world of technology it is important to be aware of the latest technologies on offer and how they can be used to the students and the employers advantage. The college also has established links with other colleges teaching Visual Merchandising such as NEGOCIA in Paris, Ware College in the UK, the School of Art, Architecture and Design, at the University of Humberside, UK, and Parsons School of Art and Design in New

York (Dublin Institute of Technology). These colleges should be consulted on an ongoing basis and an analysis of the technologies offered should be compared to the current technologies in the Institute of Technology.

I argue that the original course document is certainly satisfactory; however I believe that addition of the use of technology would create a forward looking degree course. The need of guiding the students in the use of technology needs to be addressed. Discussions with the manager, course chair and the other course tutors need to take place to ascertain how and when regarding the insertion of new modules I suggest that we must have a reflective approach to the Visual Merchandising curriculum, particularly as it is a new course and the lecturers are in the process of a learning curve; I also believe that we must look forward and embrace the use of new technologies to create a valid contemporary curriculum. Barnett and Coate (2005, p.12) believed *‘that the idea of the curriculum has not seriously been engaged within higher education debate and policy formation and even its practices. Curriculum design in higher education is not yet a properly reflective practice.’* The development of innovative, transformational curricular and instructional approaches in the classroom is an essential component of reflective practice (Brubacher, Case, Reagan, 1994). The suggestion of additional or alternate modules needs to be presented to colleagues on the course in such a way that they do not feel alienated by the technology, but rather see it as a tool to increase student’s creativity and productivity. An interactive meeting attended by managers and teaching staff on the programme needs to take place. This could take the format of a presentation of the merits of incorporating technology into the course followed by an open discussion.

Kerry Meakin

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